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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000427

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CHIEF SEPHARDIC RABBI SEES INTERRELIGIOUS BRIDGE
AS BEST HOPE FOR PEACE

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Chief Sephardic Rabbi Schlomo Amar highlighted the importance of promoting dialogue between Jewish and Muslim religious leaders as a means to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a January 26 meeting with the Ambassador. Rabbi Amar emphasized that the GOI should encourage greater cooperation between Jewish and Muslim religious leaders. Upon hearing the breaking news of the overwhelming Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections during the meeting, Rabbi Amar commented that it is better to have happened "today than tomorrow" and that "Hamas would have to change." Amar questioned whether the disengagement plan had emboldened Palestinian terrorists to continue violence. End summary.

Promote Understanding of Israel

¶2. (SBU) The Israeli Chief Rabbinate is led by Sephardic Chief Rabbi Schlomo Amar and Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger. It is Israel's official religious authority. Chief Sephardic Rabbi Schlomo Amar, accompanied by Director-General of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel Oded Wiener, began the meeting by expressing his hope for "a real peace" for Israel.

Amar said that while he does not wish to involve himself in the political arena, he is concerned that, from his perspective, the international community, and particularly the Arab world, is more aware of and has shown more sympathy toward Palestinian suffering than Israeli suffering. He asked the Ambassador to promote greater awareness and understanding of Israel's suffering. The Ambassador agreed that this perception does exist in countries and commented that the Palestinian people have also suffered because of actions by their own leadership.

Rabbi on Hamas, Disengagement

¶3. (C) Reacting to breaking news about the Hamas victory in the January 25 Palestinian Legislative Council elections, Rabbi Amar commented that it is better that the Hamas victory "happen today, than tomorrow." The Rabbi said that Hamas would have to change. He then expressed concern that the disengagement plan, which he described as a "gift to have more peace" to the Palestinians, would "toughen" the terrorists and embolden them to continue violence. The Ambassador said that if terrorists believe this, they will be proven wrong.

Life is More Important Than Land

¶4. (SBU) Rabbi Amar maintained that the purpose of the separation barrier is to save lives. To highlight his view on the overall sanctity of life, Amar said that there is a story in the Torah about two Jewish tribes that wanted to settle in Jordan, claiming they had a lot of property. They asked Moses for his permission for them to remain there with their families to protect the land. Moses responded that they could not stay, since his priority is to protect life, not property. The Ambassador said that placing greater importance on life than property reflects the USG view. Amar said that he can see that "President Bush fights hard for life," and he praised President Bush for his fight against terrorism. "History will remember him for this," Amar said.

Interreligious Cooperation

¶5. (SBU) In response to the Ambassador's query as to what role religion can play to promote peace, Director-General Wiener noted that Rabbi Amar and Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yona Metzger visited the Vatican and met with Pope John Paul II in January 2004 and with Pope Benedict XVI in September 2005. Wiener said that the Chief Rabbis have been involved in conferences to promote dialogue between religions, including the January 3 conference at Bar Ilan University entitled, "Bridging the Worlds Judaism and Islam."

16. (SBU) In response to the Ambassador's query, Rabbi Amar stressed his belief that dialogue between Muslim and Jewish leaders is "the only thing that might help" resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He underlined his view that the GOI should encourage and facilitate Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders to engage in dialogue. He said that some religious leaders, particularly Muslim leaders, are "afraid" of reprisals if they engage in such dialogue. "Someone should give hints to the GOI" to invest in this effort, Amar said.

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JONES